



Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo"

Zora Neale Hurston

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In 1927, Zora Neale Hurston went to Plateau, Alabama, just outside Mobile, to interview eighty-six-year-old Cudjo Lewis. Of the millions of men, women, and children transported from Africa to America as slaves, Cudjo was then the only person alive to tell the story of this integral part of the nation's history. Hurston was there to record Cudjo's firsthand account of the raid that led to his capture and bondage fifty years after the Atlantic slave trade was outlawed in the United States.

In 1931, Hurston returned to Plateau, the African-centric community three miles from Mobile founded by Cudjo and other former slaves from his ship. Spending more than three months there, she talked in depth with Cudjo about the details of his life. During those weeks, the young writer and the elderly formerly enslaved man ate peaches and watermelon that grew in the backyard and talked about Cudjo's past—memories from his childhood in Africa, the horrors of being captured and held in a barracoon for selection by American slavers, the harrowing experience of the Middle Passage packed with more than 100 other souls aboard the *Clotilda*, and the years he spent in slavery until the end of the Civil War.

Offering insight into the pernicious legacy that continues to haunt us all, black and white, this work is an invaluable contribution to our shared history and culture.

Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo" Details

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Will Byrnes says

“...I want to ask you many things. I want to know who you are and how you came to be a slave; and to what part of Africa do you belong, and how you fared as a slave, and how you have managed as a free man?”...when he lifted his wet face again he murmured, Thankee Jesus! Somebody come ast about Cudjo! I want tellee somebody who I is, so maybe dey go to tell everybody whut Cudjo says, and how I come to Americky soil since de 1859 and never see my people no mo’. “

Barracoon - An enclosure in which black slaves were confined for a limited period.
-Oxford English Dictionary

Before she was a world-renowned novelist, Alabama-born and Florida-raised Zora Neale Hurston was an anthropologist, an ethnographer, a researcher into the history and folklore of black people in the American South, the Caribbean, and Honduras. She was a central figure in the Harlem Renaissance, producing works of fiction in addition to her anthropological work.

Cudjo at home – from History.com - (Credit: Erik Overbey Collection, The Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of South Alabama)

It was during this period that she first met the last known black man transported from Africa to America as a slave, Cudjoe Lewis. She interviewed Lewis, then in his 80s, in 1927, producing a 1928 article about his experiences, *Cudjoe's Own Story of the Last American Slaver*. There were some issues with that report, including a serious charge of plagiarism. Hurston returned to Lewis in Africatown, Alabama, to interview him at length. It is these interviews that form the bulk of her book, *Barracoon*, plagiarism no longer being at issue.

Zora Neale Hurston - image from Smithsonian

Her efforts to publish the book ran into some cultural headwind, publishers refused to proceed so long as her subject's dialogue was presented in his idiomatic speech. Hurston refused to remove this central element of the story, and so the book languished. But the Zora Neale Trust did not give up, and a propitious series of events seemed to signal that the time was right

Last fall, on the PBS genealogy series *Finding Your Roots*, the musician Questlove learned that he descends from people brought over on the Clotilda. Then an Alabama reporter named Ben Raines found a wreck that looked to be the scuttled ship; it wasn't, but the story made national news....[while] Kossola's relevance goes beyond any headlines, [there are also] noteworthy links there: one of Kossola's sons is killed by law enforcement, and his story holds a message about recognizing humanity echoed by Black Lives Matter. -
from Time Magazine article

Then there is the story itself. Hurston gets out of the way, acting mostly as Cudjoe's stenographer and editor, reporting his words as he spoke them. It is a harrowing tale. A young village man in 1859, Kossula (his true name) was in training to learn military skills when his community was attacked by a neighboring tribe. His report of the attack is graphic, and gruesome. Many of those who survived the crushing assault were dragged away and sold to white slave traders. (Definitely **not** their choice, Kanye) We learn of his experiences while awaiting his transportation, his telling of the Middle Passage, arrival in America and his five years as a slave.

He tells, as well, of the establishment of Africatown, after the Civil War ended the Peculiar Institution in the United States, and of the travails of his life after that, having and losing children, running up against the so-called legal system, but also surviving to tell his tale, and gaining respect as a storehouse of history and folklore. This is an upsetting read, rage battles grief as we learn of the hardships and unfairness of Kossula's life.

“Oh Lor’, I know it you call my name. Nobody don’t callee me Kossula, jus’ lak I in de Affica soil!”

The book stands out for many reasons. Among them is that it is one of very few reports of slavery from the perspective of the slave. There are many documents available that recorded the transactions that involved human cargo, and many reports by slavers, but precious little has been heard from the cargo itself. It is also a significant document in teaching us about the establishment of Africatown, a village set up not by African Americans, but by Africans, Cudjoe and his fellow former slaves. The stories Cudjoe tells are often those he learned in his home culture.

'The Brookes' Slave Ship Diagram – from the British Library

Barracoon is a triumph of ethnography, bringing together not only a first-person report on experiences in African slave trading, but reporting on slavery from a subject of that atrocity. In addition Kossula adds his triumphant account of joining with other freed slaves to construct an Africa-like community in America, and offers as well old-world folklore in the stories he recalls from his first nineteen years. It is a moving tale for Hurston's sensitive efforts to reach across the divide of time to encourage Kossula to relive some of the darkest moments any human can experience, sitting with him, calm, caring, and connecting. And finally, it is a truly remarkable tale Kossula tells. It will raise your blood pressure, horrify you, and encourage bursts of tears. You think *you've* had it tough? And for this man to have endured with such dignity and grace is a triumph all its own.

Commemorative Marker for Cudjo Lewis – Plateau Cemetery, Africatown, Mobile, AL - image from wiki

The text of the story is short, but Kossula's tale is epic. Editor Deborah G. Plant has added a wealth of supportive material, including parables and old-world stories Kossula told to his descendants and to residents of Africatown, a description of a children's game played in his home town in Africa, and background material on Hurston, her professional issues with an earlier piece of work, and her involvement with the Harlem Renaissance, without touching much on Hurston's unexpected political perspective on segregation. The information adds to our appreciation of the book.

Cudjo with great-grand-daughters twins Mary and Martha, born in 1923 - image from Doy Leale McCall Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of South Alabama

The ethnographical research Hurston did bolstered a perspective on African culture that different was not inferior, that African culture had great value, regardless of those who believed only in Western superiority. Long before Jesse Jackson, such research proclaimed “I am somebody.” The research Hurston did in the USA, Caribbean and Central America certainly informed and strengthened the portraits she painted in her fiction writing.

The history of slavery is a dark one, however much light has been shone on it in the last century and a half. This moving, upsetting telling of a life that endured it is a part of that history. That this 80-year-old nugget

has been buried under the weight of time is a shame. But there is an upside. The pressure of all those years has created something glistening and wonderful for us today, a diamond of a vision into the past.

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-----5/8/2018 - hardcover

-----1/7/20 - Trade paperback

=====EXTRA STUFF

VIDEO

-----A film shot by ZNH – Cudjoe appears in the opening scene

----- On the unveiling of a bust of Cudjoe in Africatown - WKRG in Mobile – it also includes an interview with Israel Lewis, one of Kossula's descendants

-----A contemporary profile of Africatown and the challenges it faces, particularly from hazardous industry nearby

EXTRA READING

-----Emma Langdon Roche's 1914 book, *Historic Sketches of the South*, includes much on the Clotilde

-----Wiki on Cudjoe - includes images from E.L. Roche

-----Smithsonian Magazine – May 2, 2018 - Zora Neale Hurston's 'Barracoon' Tells the Story of the Slave Trade's Last Survivor - by Anna Diamond

----- History.com piece on ZNH's work on Barracoon - The Last Slave Ship Survivor Gave an Interview in the 1930s. It just Surfaced by Becky Little – (the interviewing was actually done in the 1920s)

-----Bitfal Entertainment - A pretty nice brief summary of Cudjoe's experience, with many uncaptioned illustrations

-----Time Magazine - Zora Neale Hurston's Long-Unpublished Barracoon Finds Its Place After Decades of Delay - by Lily Rothman

----- On the slave ship Clotilda

-----NY Times - May 26, 2019 - 'Ship of Horror': Discovery of the Last Slave Ship to America Brings New Hope to an Old Community - By Richard Fausset

-----National Geographic - January, 2020 - America's last slave ship stole them from home. It couldn't steal their identities. - much more information about the Clotilda's criminal mission, and about the lives of the men and women it transported and their descendants

AUDIO

-----NPR's Lynn Neary talks with Amistad's editorial director Tracy Sherrod, and Barracoon's editor

Deborah Plant - In Zora Neale Hurston's 'Barracoon' Language is the Key to Understanding - Definitely

listen to the entire interview. It is under four minutes. One wonderful benefit is to get a sample of the audio reading of the book, which sounds amazing.

Tracy Sherrod is the editorial director of Amistad at Harper Collins, which is now publishing the book. She says Hurston tried to get it published back in the 1930s, but the manuscript was rejected. "They wanted to publish it," Sherrod says, "but they wanted Zora to change the language so it wasn't written in dialect and more in standard English.

And she refused to do so."

Hurston refused, says Deborah Plant, because she understood that Lewis's language was key to understanding him. "We're talking about a language that he had to fashion for himself in order to negotiate this new terrain he found himself in," she says. "Embedded in his language is everything of his history. To deny him his language is to deny his history, to deny his experience — which ultimately is to deny him, period. To deny what happened to him."

Chrissie says

“All these words from the seller, but not one word from the sold.”

Here, Zora Neale Hurston expresses why she wrote this book.

I have had difficulty rating this book. That the book has now finally come to be published **IS** of course wonderful. It should have been published decades and decades ago!

BUT, but, but... I do have some complaints with the final product.

Only half of this book is in fact Cudjo Lewis' story, his story, told by him. Zora Neale Hurston was absolutely right in demanding that his voice should be heard and that he was to be allowed to speak in his own dialect. Cudjo Lewis was the last known survivor of the Atlantic slave trade. He was captured by a rival tribe in 1859 and sold into slavery. Oluale Kossola, renamed Cudjo Lewis by the plantation owner who bought him in 1860, spent three weeks in a stockade (a barracoon) and was shipped to America on the last slave ship, the Clotilda. Born in 1841, he came to America at 19 years of age, was a slave for five years and six months and then was freed by Yankee soldiers on April 12, 1865. In Africa he was one of twelve siblings, the second son of his father's second wife. In America, he married, had six children, all of whom died as well as his wife before his own death. He converted to Christianity and after a train accident became a sexton in a Baptist church in Africa Town, a.k.a. Plateau, Alabama.

First in July of 1927, then in December and finally 1928, he came to be interviewed by Zora Neale Hurston, cultural anthropologist, investigating ethnographer and author. She had been “sent by Dr. Franz Boas to get a firsthand report of the raid that had brought him to America and bondage, for Dr. Carter G. Woodson of the *Journal of Negro History*.” Cudjo was then eighty-six and had lived in America for sixty-seven years! Zora let Cudjo speak—in his own time and in his own way. On a doorstep, on a porch, after sweeping the church, after introducing his two great grandchildren and sending them each off with peaches in their hands, Cudjo would talk and remember and Zora would listen, only rarely interposing a question, enjoying a peach, a hunk of watermelon and time together.

These interviews and Cujo's remembrances are the core of this book, but they are only about half of the entire book. The other half consists of multiple prefaces and introductions and an appendix. The first introduction is written by Deborah G. Plant. Thereafter follows a preface and introduction by Zora Neale Hurston. In this way material comes to be repeated over and over and over again. There exists an unresolved discussion of whether Zora Neale Hurston had plagiarized information from Emma Langdon Roche's *Historic Sketches of the South*. While I agree that this had to be included, the many details, rather than clarifying, leave the issue still open to debate. Why Hurston's book, completed in 1931, was not published is

also discussed, the primary reason being she insisted on retaining Cudjo's original dialect and vernacular. The appendix at the end has assorted stories, the value of which can be questioned.

We hear Cudjo's story and we hear it in his words, which has great value, but do not mistakenly think you will be given Zora Neale Hurston's prose. All though the telling is straightforward, a reader / a listener must perceive what this poor man has gone through—the loss of his entire family, the loss of his country and home, the loss of freedom and the horrific memories of the slaughter of his tribesmen and passage over the sea. His words as well as his silences speak.

In print, the dialect could perhaps be hard to follow, but this is not the case when Robin Miles reads the audiobook! I never had trouble understanding the text! The African names were a bit of a blur, since I recognized nothing. The dialect and vernacular does demand one's full attention while listening. The narration I have given four stars.

This is a story that needed to be told, but the presentation is repetitive, much reads as an academic essay and some information is in fact missing. We are not told when or how Cudjo died. I do not regret having picked this up. My two star rating means it was OK, not bad!

I am off to read, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, only now finally made available to me! I gave *Dust Tracks on a Road* three stars.

Petra-X says

This book was suppressed for over 70 years because the myth of poor, exploited Africans capturing and selling their countrymen to the evil white slavers suited America with their collective guilt and wish not to offend African-Americans further. But you cannot build a house on shifting sands, and this book, by one of America's absolute top journalists of the era, provides part of the missing foundation.

I read it at more or less the same time as the very genial Michael W. Twitty's *The Cooking Gene: A Journey Through African American Culinary History in the Old South* which explores, through extreme DNA analysis of his blood, all the strands from Africa to Scotland that have, slaver and enslaved, native American and free white, alike, It is not just cooking but culture, and both have affected American history.

At this time I also read *The Hungry Empire: How Britain's Quest for Food Shaped the Modern World*. This had a chapter on slavery in Africa. It was very surprising to read of the salons of the African women with their imported china tea sets and high life style financed by their involvement in the slave trade. This was a very sophisticated society. This was not the rough, tribal end we are all taught were exploited by the slavers.

These three books together have opened my eyes more to the organisation of the immense business of entrapping people, holding them as goods, and selling them to be enslaved as essentially farm animals. And the best of these, *Barracoon* has been suppressed.

Hurston interviewed the last living slave, Mr. Cudjo Lewis, over three months. He tells in detail of his capture at the age of 19 and the conditions in his part of Africa that meant his capturers main business was the supply of captured men and consequently agriculture suffered from a lack of manpower and they had to import their foodstuff. That's a very cynical society that does that to its fellow men, one that puts profit above feeding the nation. Oh wait, that's almost a model for our own societies today.

It isn't brilliantly written, it is very short, but it is paradigm-shifting and I would like to give everyone a copy of this book, every school child, every adult in all the countries that captured or enslaved Africans and all the African-Americans who suffered from in this business where the Black man is as much to blame as the

White. If there had been no 'product' to buy, there would have been no trade. (Someone else would have suffered instead). This is not to take away from slavery the extreme cruelty wrought on Africans as slaves by the White man, I'm only talking here of the business of demand and supply. How Africans were treated in the Americas is strictly the White man's sin.

I am writing this not as an American, I'm writing this as a British woman with half my life spent in the Caribbean, in an educated country where the Black man has been king for 150 years. My perspective may not be one you share. But a review is an opinion, a collection of thoughts engendered by a book, and these are mine.

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